

Constructive and Positive Approaches of Gandhi and Gora

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GANDHI: THE UNIQUE PERSONALITY:

Gandhi was remarkably different from several prophets and philosophers. Prophets often claim occult powers and infallibility; profess experience of visions and revelations; and perform tricks which devotees deem as miracles. But Gandhi was a simple man. He claimed no supernatural powers and wanted none. Gandhi's greatness lay in his commonness. Gandhi's devotion to truth gave a new dimension to every aspect of life he touched, education or politics or aesthetics.

Gandhi never consulted a soothsayer or an astrologer for a satyagraha. He did not believe in superstitions. He did not believe in wearing amulets and did not look for good omen nor was afraid of a bad omen. Never did Gandhi show his hand to a palmist. Gandhi did not prostrate before babas and swamis. He never shifted the blame on others for his failures. On the contrary, Gandhi asked sadhus and sanyasins to join in the freedom struggle and undertake social reconstruction activities.

Humanism was not a mere moral sentiment with Gandhi. It was a living reality. Humans are born equal and hence they should live equal. Gandhi was growing and moving from truth to truth. He never allowed old forms to hamper progress. Arne Naess said in his study of *Gandhi and the Nuclear Age*, "We may more readily understand why Gandhi's theism stood not at all in the way of supporting an atheist, or of recognizing the possibility that an atheist might come nearer the truth than Gandhi himself." Gora wrote in *An Atheist with Gandhi*, "Gandhiji was pre-eminently a practical man. He judged theories and ideologies by the results they yielded in practice. Indeed it is a safe method to settle differences." (p. 55)

He was unconventional in his thinking and dynamic in his approach. He was exposed to the Eastern and Western cultures and traditions. His education in England, interaction with people of different races in South Africa and his ten year experience in the method of Satyagraha, provided him the qualities of leadership, which none other had in the Indian scene at that time. The combination of the agitation and constructive approaches made him a remarkable leader, who understood the pulse of the Indian masses. He was a dynamic leader, who made his religion as an instrument of social change. Even though, he was using traditional religious jargon, he changed their connotation to convey new meanings. He talked about the fundamental unity of all religions and insisted on putting into practice the ideals the people cherished. Human dignity, self respect and concern for fellow humans was his aim.

Gandhi's Constructive Programmes:

Gandhi started his constructive work initially with three items in India in 1919: propagation of Khadi and village industries, Hindu-Muslim Unity and Rural Reconstruction. As he was ever receptive to new ideas, by 1940s, his constructive work had 13 items. On the eve of Independence, the Programme was expanded to 18 items. Even then, he said that they were only illustrative and many more items could be covered. He stated: "All our philosophy is dry as dust if it is not immediately translated into some act of loving service" (Desai, 1953: 261).

For Gandhi, in all his programmes, the prime consideration was human welfare. He said:

"I will give you a talisman. Whenever you are in doubt, or the self becomes too much with you, try the following experiment:

"Recall the face of the poorest and the most helpless man whom you may have seen and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he be able to gain any thing by it? Will it restore him to control over his own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to *Swaraj* or self rule for the hungry and also spiritually starved millions of our countrymen? Then you will find your doubts and yourself melting away (ed. Narayan 1968: 46).

Highlighting the significance of *The Constructive Programme*, Gandhi said:

"Working for Economic equality means abolishing the eternal conflict between capital and labour. It means leveling down of the few rich in whose hands is concentrated the bulk of the nation's wealth on the one hand, and leveling up of the semi-starved naked millions on the other." (*Constructive Programme*)

He was well aware of the fact that the attainment of social and economic freedoms is much more difficult than achieving political freedom for the country. He was for democratic decentralization and strengthening the grassroots. He wrote: "There are two schools of thought current in the world--the urban which would result in centralization of authority and the rural which strengthens village and leads to decentralization of authority and builds from below."

Gandhi made it clear that "True building of swaraj consists in the millions of India wholeheartedly working out the Constructive programme. Without it the whole nation cannot rise from age-long stupor." (*Gandhi's Correspondence with Government*, 354). Gandhi equated the constructive programme to the drill the soldiers do every day to keep themselves fit to face any eventualities. The nonviolent army or Santi Sena will be ready with its constructive work which enables it to act immediately.

The welfare of the poorest of the poor was his main concern. "Unto this last" was his motto. In the social field, he was harping on eradication of untouchability and equality of women. Highlighting the significance of constructive work as a preparation for struggles, Gandhi said: "All this constructive work should be for its own sake. And yet be sure that it would develop the quality required for non-violent responsible government. That is how I began my work in South Africa. I began with serving them [people] for civil disobedience. I did not know myself that I was training myself....¹". Thus Gandhi evolved from truth to truth and widened the area of his struggle.

The moment he landed in India he completely changed his outlook, and even his attire, dressing like an ordinary peasant. Thus, in word and deed he was one with the poorest of the poor and he became a champion of millions. He was greatly impressed by the *swadeshi* movement against the partition of Bengal by the Governor General Lord Curzon. In his book *Hind Swaraj or the Indian Home Rule*, he took note of the growing Swadeshi movement in India against the boycott of foreign goods. He realized that appeal to the past would have an electrifying effect on the minds of people. He made a clear cut distinction between civilization and culture. Through *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi placed before people his positive approach. Swaraj would not be a gift of the British, but people of India should earn it. Being a constructive genius, he turned the traditional implements in the villages into the symbols of non-violent revolution and instruments to defy the mighty British Empire. The spinning wheel, weaving of the Khadi, (hand spun cloth) and the village industries were age old. Soon he adopted them and infused in them a new meaning of self-reliance. They became the means and symbols of nonviolent revolution.

GANDHI REDISCOVERED: INDIA LIVES IN VILLAGE:

India lives in villages – It was the rediscovery of Gandhi, which strengthened the nationalist movement with a new spirit and meaning. The Nationalist movement, which was till then urban oriented, Gandhi tuned it into a mass national movement with strong roots in the villages. He made people realize their own strength. He dreamt of Gram Swaraj, (Village Independence) and he developed a philosophy of democratic decentralization, by revitalizing age old-old village industries.

Gandhi had his political struggles only once in a decade. In the early 1920s, 1930s and 1940s he had satyagrahas harping on massive non-cooperation or civil disobedience movements. But he could keep thousands of workers and millions of people under his spell bound influence, by the Constructive programme. The Ashrams started in different parts of the country thus became centres of social reconstruction. He kept the reservoir of human energy

¹ *Harijan*, June 10, 1936

ready for political struggles through day to day constructive and positive action. He reinforced it further by infusing new blood into the movement.

In 1921, Gandhi gave a clarion call for non-cooperation with the Government. He asked the students to boycott schools and colleges, lawyers to boycott courts and people to burn foreign cloth. He suggested people to undertake national and social reconstruction activities along with agitations. He asked them to start national schools and take up spinning and weaving to produce their own cloth—the khadi. He developed constructive programmes in every aspect of life. The 18 Items of the Constructive are:

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| 1) Communal Unity (Hindu-Muslim etc.) | 9) Women |
| 2) Removal of untouchability | 10) Education of health and hygiene |
| 3) Prohibition (of intoxicants and narcotics) | 11) Provincial languages |
| 4) Khadi (hand spun and hand woven cloth) | 12) National language |
| 5) Other village industries | 13) Economic equality |
| 6) Village sanitation | 14) <i>Kisans</i> (agricultural peasants) |
| 7) New or basic education | 15) Labour |
| 8) Adult education | 16) <i>Adivasis</i> (Hill tribes or aborigines) |
| | 17) Lepers and |
| | 18) Students |

The 18 Items of the Constructive programme stand for : communal unity between Hindus and Muslims, removal of untouchability, adult education, village improvement, peasant uplift, and peaceful trade unions, economic and social equality, decentralized economic production and distribution through promotion of cottage and village industries and striving for abolition of various social evils such as alcoholic and intoxicating drinks and also upliftment of women, tribals and improvement of health and hygiene of people. He also emphasized on the role of students, labour, education and promotion of national and regional languages.

The items of the Constructive programme were essential ingredients in the national and social reconstruction. Just before his assassination, Gandhi appealed to the Indian National Congress to disband itself after Independence and become a social service organization. Attaining Political independence was the necessary first step. He insisted on simultaneous voluntary effort for social and economic reconstruction. Gandhi was explicit on this in his Constructive Programme:

New meaning and Direction

Each item of the Constructive Programme was mundane and was not in itself revolutionary. It was at best a reform programme. But it was the remarkable ability of Gandhi to weave them together and bring a new texture and meaning of a nonviolent revolution. It was the combination of the political agitation and village reconstruction that brought a revolutionary change in the outlook of people.

Poverty Eradication was the goal

Gandhi gave highest priority to economic equality through nonviolent means. The 13th Item of the Constructive Programme was striving for “economic equality”, which Gandhi regarded as the master key to nonviolent action. He forewarned that if economic equality of was not achieved in the country, one day a “violent and blood revolution is a certainty.”

When we go through the 100 Volumes of the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, we find that underpinning of all his actions was how to banish poverty. With his in-depth understanding of the Western World, Gandhi came to the conclusion that it was **not mass production, but production by the masses** alone that would solve the problem of poverty and unemployment in India. For him nonviolence was not a mere philosophy, but a plan of action.

The Dynamic and Evolving Personality of Gandhi:

Mahatma Gandhi's thinking evolved with a series of interactions people and situations. Gandhi was not only tolerant towards others religions, but also advocated Hindu-Muslim Unity in India in his efforts to solve the burning communal problem and advocated equality of all religions, but also realized that there were many non-religious people in the world. His thinking evolved over years with his encounter with atheists and non-believers. As Gandhi was evolving in his thinking and he was a practical idealist, he changed his stand towards atheists. He realized over years that it was not enough if he had toleration towards people of other religions, but also that he should respect non-religious people. He thus proceeded further from mere toleration of all religions, and evolved in his thinking further to accept even atheists as equals.

Even though Gandhi used traditional jargon in his language, he was ever receptive to new ideas and actions. He looked for common cause to strive for the cherished goal. When he was a student in London, he attended the funeral of Charles Bardlaugh, the British atheist who was President of the National Secular Society.

Gandhi's life was a saga of experiments with truth. In fact, his autobiography was captioned “*My Experiments with Truth*”. He moved from truth to truth, being dynamic in his approach and radical in his thought and actions. He was not only a theoretician, but also a man of action and a leader of the masses. For him proximity to truth was more important than consistency with earlier statements. He declared that if some of his statements contradict earlier ones, he appealed to people to take the latest as the authentic one.

Even in the matter of eradication of caste and untouchability, Gandhi's ideas evolved slowly which contradicted his earlier stand. At first Gandhi was averse for inter-dining and inter-caste marriages. By 1935, Gandhi took the stand: “Caste has to go. Varnashrama of Sastras [Varna system of Hindu scriptures] is nonexistent in practice.” The present caste system is the very antithesis of varnashrma, he declared².

² *Collected Works of Gandhi*, LII, 121 f

By 1946, Gandhi changed further. Louis Fischer author of *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, wrote: "He [Gandhi] said he was trying to create a classless and casteless India. He yearned for the day when there would be only one caste, and Brahmins would marry Harijans. "I am a social revolutionist," he asserted (Fischer 1950: 425).

In 1946, Gandhi made the startling announcement that no marriage would be celebrated in his ashram at Sevagram, unless one of the parties was an "untouchable" by birth. Gandhi said: "At one time I did say that inter-dining was not an essential part of the campaign for the removal of untouchability. Personally, I was for it. Today I encourage it. In fact, today I go even further.³"

Gora and Saraswathi Gora:

Gora was born on November 15, 1902 at Chattrapur in Ganjam District in the then composite Madras Province (which is now part of Orissa state). At that time his father, hailing from Andhra region, was working as a revenue official there. As his father was transferred to port town of Kakinada, Gora had his school education in the town and then obtained post-graduate degree in Botany from the Presidency College Madras. Then, for fifteen years he taught Botany in Madurai, Coimbatore, Colombo, Kakinada and Machilipatnam in South India. He was not only a popular professor among the students, but also he challenged superstitions and blind beliefs. He stayed in so-called haunted houses; and exploded the myths of devils and demons.

Gora by his training and temperament was a scientist. He adopted scientific outlook not only in the classroom, but also towards life problems. Interaction with people of diverse faiths convinced Gora that god was only a human imagination and religions were perpetuating myths and superstitions to maintain their hegemony over people.

When Gora wrote an article on the Concept of god in 1933, he was dismissed from P.R. College, Kakinada. After six years, in 1939, he was again dismissed for his atheistic views from the Hindu College, Machilipatnam. The College authorities insisted that he should not give lectures on atheism or take up social reform activities, even outside the college. That was the time some College lecturers were giving discourses on Hindu religion. The college students felt that it was discrimination against Gora and they went on strike demanding that Gora's freedom of expression should not be curtailed. The College had to reinstate him. But Gora decided to sacrifice his lucrative teaching job, to devote full time for the propagation of atheism and social change.

At the invitation of villagers, Gora along with his wife Saraswathi, moved to a remote village, Mudunur, in Krishna District in Andhra Pradesh and founded the world's first known Atheist Centre in 1940. A dedicated band of co-workers joined them in the Atheist Centre which

³ Collected Works of Gandhi, XXXV, 25

was akin to Gandhi's ashram, where all the co-workers in social change activities lived together with ideological affinity to work with the people in the villages.

Gora and Saraswathi had been active right from 1930s in supporting and performing widow-remarriages, fighting superstitions, and breaking the barriers of caste and untouchability and in organizing educational programmes in the untouchable slums.

After establishing Atheist Centre, they took up programmes to break the caste barriers by organizing interdining, opening of public wells to the so-called Untouchables. These programmes for social equality were carried on in the teeth of opposition from the orthodox sections of society. They started adult education programmes for citizenship training. Inter-caste marriages were advocated in the villages. His scientific thinking, rational and social reform outlook attracted the attention of the youth and admired him as their role model.

Being staunch nationalists, Gora and Saraswathi plunged into 1942 Quit India Movement. They motivated people in large numbers to participate in the satyagraha. Gora became an important functionary of the Congress Movement in the State. In the Quit India Movement, he was imprisoned twice.

SARASWATHI GORA (1912-2006):

Saraswathi was born on September 28, 1912 at Vizianagaram in Andhra region. She was born in an orthodox Hindu family. Right from her childhood, she was brought up in a liberal atmosphere of social literary figures. She was married to Gora in 1922 and in 1928 she joined him in Colombo. Since then they were together facing all the vicissitudes of life.

She was a self made woman with robust common sense and commitment to the ideals of atheism and social change. She viewed the eclipse by defying the Hindu custom that pregnant women should not do so. Traditional Hindus feared that if the pregnant see eclipse, they will give birth to deformed babies. As she was on the family way, she took the bold step and her child was born perfectly normal.

When Gora was Head of the Department of Botany at Kakinada and Machilipatnam colleges, she participated in widow remarriages, and inter-dining programmes. Their commitment to atheism and social change was further strengthened.

She was the co-founder of Atheist Centre and carried on all its activities by adopting voluntary poverty and austere living. By then, Gora and Saraswathi had seven children. (By 1948 they had 9 children. When family planning operations were within the reach of people, Gora underwent vasectomy and also promoted the same among common people).

In the Quit India Movement, Saraswathi Gora led a batch of women satyagrahis and courted arrest. She took her two-year old son to prison along with her. After return from the prison, Saraswathi again took up social reform activities and also walked on fire leading a batch of illiterate village women to dispel the superstitions associated with it.

FOUNDATION OF ATHEIST CENTRE:

Gora and Saraswathi started the world's first known Atheist Centre in 1940, to promote atheism as a positive way of life. They undertook many activities for adult and social education; organized marriages of *devadasis* (dancers in temples) and widows; fight against caste system and untouchability; organized inter-dining, and took up programmes to bring attitudinal change in the society to mainstream the so-called untouchables.

In the then tradition bound society, untouchability and inter-untouchability were strong. Even the sub-castes of untouchables lived aloof without any interaction. Hence in 1940s and 1950s, wherever Gora couple went to address a meeting or any other function in villages, they insisted on organizing an inter-dining programme for them, along with the local so-called untouchables. They also insisted that their stay must be arranged in the so-called untouchable locality. It was a revolutionary step for social equality. Gora family and other members of the Atheist Centre attended only such marriages where the so-called local untouchables were also invited. They also urged that the programme of proposed inter-dining should be printed on the wedding card as well.

Atheist Centre also extended protection to inter-caste married couples. All the marriages were performed in blazing sun of openness. Atheist Centre stood for integration of all, and not separation. The problem of untouchability is intricately inter-connected with caste and religion. Untouchability is practiced not only in Hindu religion, but also by some other religions in India. Herold Isaac's *India's Ex-Untouchables* gives a graphic description how the subtle practices of untouchability entered even into the Christian religion. Gora couple advocated the need to march towards a post-religious society and wanted to share their experiences of social reform with Gandhi.

GORA'S ENCOUNTER WITH GANDHI:

POSITIVE ATHEISTIC APPROACH OF GORA:

In 1941, Gora wrote a letter to Gandhi sharing his experiences of Atheist Centre and how he tackled the problem of untouchability with the atheistic outlook. He wrote: "I have a few co-workers who agree with me in the atheistic approach. The atheistic approach mainly consists in the non-recognition of sectarian labels like Hindus, Muslims and Christians. We take man as man. Thus by discarding the labels and mixing up people in the general stream of humanity, we hope to remove untouchability also." He described how he organized systematic and periodical cosmopolitan dinners. In the village atmosphere where caste restrictions continue to be rigid, open cosmopolitan dinners were not easy to accomplish. He stated further that the results of one year's work encourage them to



Oil Painting by Veerabhamram

proceed along the same lines. Gora sought Gandhi's advice and guidance and expressed the wish to meet him in this regard.

Gandhi came to know the details of Gora's work through a friend who also stayed at the Atheist Centre. Finally Gandhi and Gora, met at Sevagram Ashram in November, 1944. Gandhi greeted Gora with a smile and said, "what shall I talk to a godless man?" Gora replied he was not godless, but an atheist which was positive in connotation and action. Gandhi inquired about Gora's work in the villages and his experiences in tackling the problem of untouchability. After the first interview with Gandhi, Gora realized that Gandhi was pre-eminently a practical man. He judged theories and ideologies by the results they yielded in practice. Indeed that is a safe method to settle differences.

On the impression of his first meeting with Gandhi, in his book, *An Atheist with Gandhi*, Gora wrote:

"Gandhiji had the same views and prejudices against atheism as the common man. But in his characteristic way he clothed them with courtesy, when he remarked that the present conduct of people gave room for the spread of atheism. Evidently he thought that atheism had developed in reaction to the misbehaviour of god-believers and that better conduct on their part would render atheism unnecessary. But I felt differently. The theistic outlook is fundamentally defective and it is bound to corrupt social behaviour. The misdeeds of the theists are neither whims nor forced by circumstances but the direct consequences of their theistic outlook. So the call for atheism is not out of disgust for the present conduct of people who profess the theistic faith, but out of a desire for a better way of life. The conduct of people cannot be improved unless the atheistic outlook is adopted. Atheism and theism represent opposite forms of behaviour and each is positive in its own way." (*Ibid.*, p. 36)

Gora had second interview with Gandhi at his ashram in January, 1945 and had another long Interview on March 30, 1945.

"Now, you tell me, why do you want atheism?" Gandhi asked Gora in a calm and affectionate voice. (*Ibid.*, p.41).

Gora gave detailed account of his position as an atheist, and he told Gandhi:

I cannot remove god, if god were the truth. But it is not so. God is a falsehood conceived by man. Like many falsehoods, it was, in the past, useful to some extent. But like all falsehoods, it polluted life in the long run. So belief in god can go and it must go now in order to wash off corruption and to increase morality in mankind. I want atheism to make man self-confident and to establish social and economic equalities non-violently. Tell me, Bapu, where am I wrong? (*Ibid.*, p. 44)

Gandhi listened to Gora's long explanation patiently. Then he sat up in the bed and said slowly,

"Yes, I see an ideal in your talk. I can neither say that my theism is right nor your atheism is wrong. We are seekers after truth. We change whenever we find ourselves in the wrong. I changed like that many times in my life. I see you are a worker. You are not a fanatic. You will change whenever you find yourself in the wrong. There is no harm as long as you are not fanatical. Whether you are in the right or I am in the right, results will prove. Then I may go your way or you may come my way; or both of us may go a third way. So go ahead with your work. I will help you, though your method is against mine" (Gora 1959: 44).

BREAKING THE BARRIERS OF CASTE: MARRIAGE OF GORA'S DAUGHTER:

When Gora couple decided to celebrate their eldest daughter Manorama's marriage breaking the barriers of caste and untouchability, Gandhi himself came forward to do the marriage in his Ashram at Sevagram. As it was a revolutionary step, Gandhi put a time limit of two years for performing the marriage.

Gandhi suggested sending the bridegroom to his ashram for training. While agreeing to it Gora said, "Perhaps, in the course of the marriage ceremony, you will invoke divine blessings for the couple, or say the words: 'in the name of God'. My daughter and my son-in-law are atheistically minded. They will not be parties to such implied belief in god." Gandhi immediately said: "In the case of your daughter's marriage, I will say 'in the name of Truth' instead of 'in the name of God'. Atheists also respect truth."

Arjunarao (Gora's would be son-in-law) stayed in Sevagram Ashram for two years. Towards the end of 1947, Gandhi intimated to Gora that the marriage would be performed in April 1948. But he was assassinated three months prior to it on January 30. However, the *ashramites* who knew the details of Bapuji's promise, solemnized the marriage of his daughter, Manorama, with Arjun Rao in the Ashram on March 13, 1948. All references to god were scrupulously avoided in the ceremony. Thus Gandhi's promise was fulfilled and the atheist requirements too were fully respected. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru personally congratulated the couple in the Ashram for their bold step. The marriage received wide attention in the press for the courage of commitment of the couple and of Gora and Saraswathi Gora for striving for social equality with grim determination.

Gandhi's assassination cut short the opportunity for further discussions of Gora with Gandhi on atheism. The last words in Gora's book, *An Atheist with Gandhi* were : "Bapu is no more to help our work, but his way of work is there to guide us." (The book was published by the Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, the official publishers of Gandhi's literature, with an Introduction by K.G. Mashruwala, the editor of *Harijan*).

CASTELESS MARRIAGES TO FIGHT AGAINST UNTOUCHABILITY:

Gora and Saraswathi Gora's commitments to atheism and Gandhian ideals were life-long and they played significant role in the post-Gandhian movement in India. In 1960 Gora and Saraswathi Gora's eldest son, Lavanam's marriage with Hemalata was also celebrated at Sevagram ashram, breaking the barriers of caste and untouchability. In fact, Gora's all children, grand-children and great-grand children married casteless. Acceptance of others as equals, irrespective of their caste and religion, is a secular way to achieve social equality and upholding human dignity. One of the main activities of Atheist Centre is promotion and performance of casteless and religionless marriages. In post-Gandhian period, Gora championed Gandhi's satyagraha, and also he urged people to emulate Gandhi's secular and constructive approach.

ECONOMIC EQUALITY THROUGH NON-VIOLENT MEANS:

Gandhi was unique in combining the national liberation struggle with national building programmes. The Constructive Programmes gave a positive content to the Nationalist Movement. The Gandhian ashrams became centres of constructive work and the participants in the freedom struggle were involved in Khadi, village industries, organizing youth, women and weaker sections of the society, for building a new India.

The 13th Item of the Constructive Programme highlighted the necessity to strive for economic equality. Gandhi described it as the "Master key to non-violent action." He forewarned that unless urgent steps were taken, the economic disparities were bound to grow between the rich and the poor, and it would lead to a violent revolution. Even before the advent of Independence, Gandhi advocated voluntary abdication of riches. Highlighting the Gandhian Constructive programme, which enunciates economic equality, Gora and Dr. J.C. Kumarappa, a well known Gandhian economist, started Arthik Samata Mandal (Association for Economic Equality) as a movement in early 1950s. They also harped on the necessity of satyagraha as an instrument of social change.

BHOODAN (LAND GIFT) MOVEMENT:

Till the advent of the political Independence to India, the political wing and the persons engaged in Constructive work largely worked together. After Political Independence to India, when Congress became a political party, the Constructive workers continued their work independently and they were known as Sarvodaya (welfare all people). All the constructive work organizations were federated themselves into Sarva Seva Sangh.

When Hyderabad Native State was integrated into India by people's struggle, followed by police action, the communists continued their armed struggle against the Government. Distressed by violence in Telangana region of erstwhile Hyderabad State, Vinoba Bhave, a trusted colleague and a prominent leader of the Sarvodaya movement took up a padayatra (foot march) from his Paunar ashram near Wardha in Maharashtra to Hyderabad to attend the Sarvodaya Conference at Sivarampalli, near Hyderabad.

As the violence erupted in Hyderabad state against the concentration of land with the feudal land lords, Vinoba Bhave was searching for a non-violent solution to the land problem. When Vinoba reached in his foot march Pochmapalli village, 18 miles from Hyderabad, he

appealed to the landlords to part with some of their land with the landless. One land lord of the villages, Vedere Ramchandra Reddy, responded to his call and donated one hundred acres of land to Vinoba Bhave, for distribution of the same among the landless.

On April 18, 1950, the historic Bhoojan (land gift) movement was born in Pochampalli village. Soon it became a rallying point for the emergence of a nation-wide Bhoojan movement. Millions of acres of land were donated in Bhoojan. The efforts of Gandhian constructive workers were supplemented and complimented by Government by land reform legislations and legalized the Bhoojan land donations and their distribution to the poor.

The Bhoojan movement received great impetus when Socialist Leader Jayaprakash Narayan renounced active party politics and joined the Sarvodaya movement. It had an electrifying effect on the nationwide efforts for Sarvodaya. More than two million acres of land was collected as land donation for distribution to the poor in Bihar alone. Jayaprakash Narayan also declared that he was donating in his life for the cause of Sarvodaya. With his inspiration thousands of youth joined the movement.

Nababkrishna Chowdhry, the then popular Chief Minister of Orissa state, resigned and joined the Bhoojan movement. The scope of the movement was further widened with voluntary donation of wealth, and donation of the entire village in bhoojan, known as *Gramdan*.

GORA'S ROLE IN BHOOJAN MOVEMENT:

Atheist Centre has been actively involved in many activities of Gandhian movement in various parts of India. Gora was one of the prominent organizers of the Bhoojan (land gift) movement. He traveled all over the country championing the cause. Gora also reiterated that along with voluntary land donations, there should be political action to safeguard the interests of the poor and the landless. He reminded that in a democracy governments should not shirk their responsibilities.

Lavanam of Atheist Centre translated the speeches of Vinoba Bhave into Telugu language in his padayatra (foot march) in the length and breadth of Andhra Pradesh. When Gora and Lavanam accompanied Vinoba in Bhoojan movement, Vinoba adopted five minutes of silence in his daily meetings, instead of reciting prayers, as a goodwill gesture to the atheists and secularists in the movement in Andhra Pradesh.

PARTYLESS DEMOCRACY:

As long as Gandhi was alive, Congress was primarily a mass movement. After Independence, political party spirit, partisan outlook and group mentality developed. Distressed by such developments, Gora started the Movement of Partyless Democracy, wherein he pointed out that political parties have no constitutional status in any democratic constitution. Political parties are only an extra-constitutional growth and they came into political system by convention. In the developing world, political party spirit proved to be detrimental in furthering

people's interests. The party in power and the parties in opposition are wasting their time, talent and money criticizing one another rather than helping in the alleviation of poverty, or opposing injustice, oppression and inequalities.

Gora advocated that "Democracy does not mean simply voting at elections and making ministers. Democracy essentially means providing all people equally with food, employment, peace and respect. Food is more important than mere vote. Vote is empty without food."

Gora made it clear that political parties are suited for dictatorships; movements are suited for democracy. Parties are closed and sectarian in their mind; movements are open-minded and they take interests of people into consideration. The partisan spirit of parties lands them in party politics whose principle is "Power first and programme next".

Parties represent sectarian interests. If democracy should represent all people as a whole, it should be partyless. On account of power-politics and partisan interests, party democracy does not make the Government belong to the people. A party government belonged to the party in power. Parties changed hands, but government remained partisan. As Government, which is an institution common to all people, did not belong to the people as a whole, people had to grow selfish for self preservation. Inequalities and corruption are the results of power politics. Partylessness makes the government belong to all people, and will set about to solve all problems in people's interests.

When Gora launched partyless democracy movement and organized a national convention in Hyderabad, it was inaugurated by Jaya Prakash Narayan. In Calcutta also a Convention on partyless democracy was organized. Thus, Gora carried on numerous nationwide debates on Partyless Democracy. Many Gandhian leaders who were engaged in constructive work also subscribed to the idea of partyless democracy. Gora's book *Partyless Democracy* was published by Sarva Seva Sangh, the official publishers of the Sarvodaya movement. Gora was a strong advocate of movemental approach. Gora advocated partyless Democracy as a movement to solve people's problems in democracy.

'CONTROL THE GOVERNMENT AND CONSTRUCT THE VILLAGE':

Stressing the need for economic equality through peaceful means Gora led a satyagraha padayatra (foot march) in 1961-62 from Gandhi's Ashram at Sevagram to New Delhi, covering a distance of 1100 miles in 100 days. Gora advocated that in Democracy, people are the masters and (Government) ministers are the servants. He harped on the point "Control the Government and Construct the village". He urged the ministers to set an example by vacating the Government mansions and living closer to the common people. The satyagraha padayatra culminated in meeting the then Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru in Delhi.

⁴ Gora: *Partyless Democracy : Its Need and Form*. P.44-45.

Gora also led a series of satyagrahas, on similar lines, in Hyderabad, the State Capital of Andhra Pradesh, wherein he was urging the Chief Ministers to leave big mansions and live in Government quarters. He urged the State Governors to visit slums in urban areas and work for improving their living conditions. It may be recalled that Gandhi stayed in the so-called untouchable locality in Delhi.

Saraswathi Gora championed land reforms and abolition of Inamdar (gifts given to some individuals by the rajas) which was a remnant of the *Zamindari* system (which was encouraged by the Rajas and also by the British Government for tax collection as middle men between people and Government. But the zamindars proved to be agents of oppression of people) When the Constitution of India came into force, the Zamindaris were abolished, but not inamdaris. Saraswathi Gora led women satyagrahis in Kurnool District of Andhra Pradesh for the abolition of inamdaris so that the land be given to the tiller of the land. Along with 60 women satyagrahis, she was imprisoned for five months. Even though she was granted the A-Class in prison, she refused to avail the facility and stayed in ordinary C-Class along with others. The outcome of such struggles was abolition of *inamdaris* and distribution of the lands to tillers.

Similarly, Gora was imprisoned for one month in Madurai prison in Tamil Nadu, for demanding that the temple lands were to be given on lease to the scheduled castes and the weaker sections. Noted Sarvodaya leaders Jagannathan, Krishnammal, Rev. Fr. Kaithan, led the movement on Gandhian lines. Finally, the Tamil Nadu Government conceded to some of their demands.

SATYAGRAHA AFTER INDEPENDENCE:

Gora was a staunch advocate of Gandhian Satyagraha, even in the post-Independent India. Some people held the view that satyagraha has no place in democracy. Gora made it clear that the partisan approach was detrimental to the nation's interests and advocated movemental approach to resolve people's problems. He said that satyagraha is the safety valve in democracy. Gora wrote a number of articles and books on partyless democracy and held many conferences all over India, highlighting the place of satyagraha in democracy.

Gora said that emphasis must be placed on serving people's interests and the movement must not be for partisan interests. Atheist Centre emphasized on democratic decentralization and building from below.

GORĀ'S DEATH IN JULY 1975:

Gora died of heart attack while addressing a public meeting at Vijayawada on July 26, 1975. Tributes and condolences poured in from all over the world. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in a message stated: "Gora was a dedicated social reformer devoting his energies especially to the campaign against untouchability. He was one of those rare people who practised what he preached. His courage and sincerity in serving the weak and down-trodden made a mark on all those who came into contact with him." The Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh J. Vengal Rao personally came to Atheist Centre along with his Cabinet Ministers to pay homage to Gora. He

said: "Every one in Andhra Pradesh known him as a well known Gandhian, as a renowned propagator of atheism, as an embodiment of simplicity, and as an idealist and social reformer. ... Gora was an embodiment of Gandhiji's ideals of austere life, moral behaviour, and the urge for social change, practical idealism and fearless action."

Hugh Gray, in his presentation in The University of London on "Gora, Gandhi's Atheist Follower" analysed Gora's views on atheism, partyless democracy and his contribution to Gandhian movement. Hugh Gray cited his interview with Chundi Jagannatham, a Sarvodaya leader, on Gora's contribution. Chundi Jagannatham said:

Very few members of sarvodaya are atheists, although there are some *nastikas* (*Godless*). Many religious people worked with Gora for improvement in the lives of villagers. He had particularly strong appeal for young people. Although he rejected God, religion and even reincarnation, he brought about a total consciousness of humanity wherever he went. In villages, people are judged by their deeds, not their words, and that is why Gora seen as a saint. Gora was unique.

Hugh Gray concluded his presentation on Gora by saying "But, Gora was only unique as an atheist saint. In India, like all saints and sanyasis, he expressed himself through symbols, and behaviour which was instantly recognizable. He transcended local languages and local religions. His political identity was national not regional, although Andhra Pradesh was his main arena for action" (Pg 157).

Hugh Gray dealt at length Gora's Satyagarahas and his advocacy of partyless democracy to resolve people's problems through political movements and he highlighted also Gora's contribution to Gandhian movement with his distinctive atheist approach.

SECULAR SOCIAL WORK ACTIVITIES OF ATHEIST CENTRE:

POST-GORA PERIOD:

Atheist Centre, founded by Gora and Sarswathi Gora, is involved in comprehensive rural development activities to alleviate human suffering. It spread education, awareness and stressed on socio-economic development. Atheist Centre is having four major organizations - Arthik Samata Mandal, Vasavya Mahila Mandali, Samskar and Gora Science Centre. They are involved in secular social work in hundreds of villages.

The fight against *Jogini*,⁵ which is remnant of the Devdasi system, efforts for criminal reformation, equality of women and other disadvantaged sections of society; popularization of science and scientific temper and science exhibitions, steps to preserve and promote environment and ecology, disaster relief, rehabilitation as well as preparedness; campaigns against superstitions and blind beliefs, cover a broad spectrum of its activities. The secular social work activities of Atheist Centre received wide attention.

CRIMINAL REFORMATION:

Gora initiated criminal reformation programmes in the erstwhile criminal settlements of the de-notified tribes in Andhra Pradesh. Hemalatha and Lavanam of Atheist Centre were fully involved in the criminal reformation activities, leading to change in the hardcore criminals through socio-psychological counseling and doggedly persuasion.

With decades of work, they could break the ice. In the criminal settlements, alternative employment was generated by harping on agriculture and other vocations. The State Government came forward to help the reform process by providing 150 acres of land. Employment generation was one of the aspects. The focus was on psychological change as they considered crime as their profession. Live wire contact was maintained with the criminals in jails in the State. It was not an easy task as the perpetuation of crime was abetted by the stolen property receivers, corrupt politicians and greedy lawyers and even some in the police. It was a vicious circle and the de-notified tribes were caught in the web of circumstances.

In criminal reformation, emphasis was placed on weaning away the younger generation from the culture of crime by providing education and employment. Constant dialogue was carried with them. The strategy adopted by Atheist Centre yielded good results and the process of integration was accelerated. The reformation work of Atheist Centre won appreciation of government and the society.

JOGINI REFORMATION IN TELANGANA REGION OF ANDHRA PRADESH:

Jogini system is a social evil which continued for centuries in the rural areas of the erstwhile Hyderabad State. The so-called untouchable girls who were socially and economically weak and poor, were subjected to the inhuman custom of *Jogin*. It is known by different names—*Basivi* in Karnataka, and *Matangi* in Maharashtra. The so-called untouchable girls are dedicated to the village deities, *Ellamma* and *Potamma*. As they were supposedly to be married to the God at an early age, they were denied the right to marriage and the girls were considered as village property. Their sexual exploitation went unabated. These ignorant, illiterate girls become victims of this heinous social custom.

⁵ *Jogini* it is a heinous age-old social custom in Telangana region of Andhra Pradesh, where some untouchable girls are supposed to be married to god and then become temple prostitutes and have no right to marry.

As it is perpetuated in the name of god and religion, it was difficult to fight this evil. *Jogini* is a remnant of the *Devadasi* system. The *devadasis* dance in front of the deities in the temples, but these girls have no social status and they are subjected to dance before dead corpses and were forced to lead a sub-human life.

Endowed with practical experience in tackling the problem of criminal reformation, Samskar of Atheist Centre embarked on the *Jogini* reformation. It was an onslaught on the age old custom which is deeply entrenched in the remote villages where feudal system rules the roost.

Undaunted by the adverse conditions, Atheist Centre launched a frontal attack on the heinous custom of *Jogins* with a band of dedicated workers and advocates of social change. As the work progressed in the remote villages to stop the making of *jogins*, enlightened Government officials lent a helping hand. Adopting a Gandhian approach, it worked with the victims, and also with the persons who perpetuated the system. Simultaneously, it prevailed on the Chief Minister of the State to enact a law banning the custom. The outcome was enactment of Prohibition of *Jogini* Evil Practice Andhra Pradesh Act No. 10 of 1988 which made it a cognizable offence. Backed by the law and the voluntary movement, its efforts had an electrifying effect in Telangana region. Some State Governors lent a helping hand by making Governor's palace as the venue for some of these reform marriages. It added weight to this social reform.

The Andhra Pradesh State Government extended help with one acre of land to each changed *jogin* for their rehabilitation. Hundreds of *Jogins* were thus rehabilitated. Constant dialogue, persuasion, education, health and awareness activities were carried on with redoubled vigour.

ARTHIK SAMATA MANDAL AND VASAVYA MAHILA MANDALI:

Arthik Samata Mandal (Association for Economic Equality) and Vasavya Mahila Mandali (Women's Association for reality, social outlook and development of individual personality) have been involved in comprehensive development activities by rehabilitating hundreds of marginalized, the differently-abled, fisherfolk, children in difficult circumstances, tribals, people living with HIV AIDS, and women in distress. Atheist Centre also harps on climate change, environment protection and disaster preparedness. Atheist Centre is involved in promoting health awareness, positive health care, cornea transplant operations, imparting sex education, AIDS awareness, and providing shelter to women who are victims of torture. Socio-psychological counseling is also extended to the needy.

Atheist Centre works for the welfare of the people irrespective of their caste or religion and promotes secularism, humanism and spirit of inquiry among the young. Its programmes are geared towards gender equality and women empowerment.

UNIQUENESS OF ATHEIST CENTRE VIS A VIS GANDHIAN ORGANIZATIONS:

The Gandhian movement harps on the lopsidedness of the present process of globalization, in which the developing countries are victims of unbridled exploitation. It raises the question of social justice and preservation of human rights. Atheist Centre is making a common cause with all the like-minded in this regard. It maintains livewire contact with the rank and file in the Gandhian movement and many of them frequently visit Atheist Centre. Some members of Atheist Centre hold important positions in the Gandhian organizations.

But at the same time, Atheist Centre is distinctly different from other organizations. It is uncompromising on its basic principles of atheism, humanism, rational, scientific and secular outlook. It supplements and complements with its efforts to facilitate the march towards a post-religious society. Religion should be a personal matter. Political and social affairs must be free from religious interference. This stand makes Atheist Centre different from the Gandhian Organizations, wherein a march towards a post religious society is not advocated. Atheist Centre affirms that religion is the root cause of the bloodshed and oppression in the society, and unless and until we move beyond religion, the people cannot be alleviated from the suppression. Atheist Centre stands as a centre for critical inquiry, freedom and reform.

ADVOCATED RESERVATIONS ON THE CRITERIA OF ECONOMIC BACKWARDNESS:

In the post-Independent India, the Indian Government followed a policy of caste-based reservations. They were introduced with a good intention. But the outcome, in the long run, proved different. In order to enjoy the special privileges envisaged in the Constitution, there are constant agitations seeking these special privileges be extended to all.

Atheist Centre strongly advocates that the criteria for reservation should be economic backwardness, not caste. When the economic criteria is adopted, it will cover all the poorer sections and they will get benefit as they are poor. The economic criteria for help would bring change in the mindset of the people. In the present society, caste bonds are loosened, but casteism and feeling of separation is growing. This cuts the very roots of national integration. Atheist Centre is uncompromising on this principle of social equality. The practice of untouchability, in any form, is prohibited by law in the Article 17 of the Indian Constitution. But law alone will not bring social change. Constant awareness, courage and conviction and doggedly persuasion are required in its abolition. Social problems cannot be solved within the boundaries of religion, as intolerance and the growth of religious fanaticism and fundamentalism threaten the future of humanity. Progress of society requires foresight, rather than hindsight. What the world needs today is not only freedom of religion, but also freedom from religion.

RECOGNITION OF GORA AND SARASWATHI GORA'S WORK:

Gora's exemplary moral character, integrity and his commitment to ideals endeared many people and won admiration and respect in society. He led a full life. He was deeply rooted

in the Indian soil, but had a global vision and universal outlook. It is a tribute to Gora's life and work that Gora' Birth Centenary Celebrations began with an International Conference in 2002 which the then Lok Sabha Speaker GMC Balayogi inaugurated. Gora's 100 Birth Anniversary National Conference was inaugurated by the then Defense Minister Mr. George Fernandes. It is befitting that the Government of India had issued a postage stamp to commemorate the Birth Centenary of Gora. It is a rare honor conferred on an Atheist social reformer.

Similarly, Saraswathi Gora has received national recognition for her lifelong work. She was honoured with Jamanlal Bajaj National Award for her outstanding contribution to the welfare of women. Karnataka State Government honoured her with the very first Basava National Award for her Outstanding contribution for the eradication of untouchability and caste system. The GD Birla Foundation bestowed on her the GD Birla International Award for Promotion of Humanism. Mr. Krishnakant, the then Vice President of India presented the Birla Award to her in 2000. The International Humanist award was presented to Atheist Centre by the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) in Oslo in 1986.

In 2009, Lavanam of Atheist Centre was honoured with Jamnalal Bajaj National Award for his outstanding contribution to Gandhian Constructive Work. Hemalata Lavanam was honoured by the Andhra Pradesh Government three times for her signal contribution for the eradication of the Jogini system.

Gora and Saraswathi Gora laid firm foundations for Atheist Centre and made Positive Atheism a global movement. Taking inspiration from life and work of Gora and Saraswathi Gora, Atheist Centre continues to be in the forefront of nonviolent social change activities with its national and international perspective.

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